

Sinhalese, Tibetan, Indo-Scythian and Indo-Greek Connection of the Terracotta Plaques of *Somapura Mahāvihāra* and Their Probable Explanation

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Abstract: This study is focusing on revealing of the Sinhalese, Tibetan, Indo-Scythian and Indo-Greek connection of the terracotta plaques of *Somapura Mahāvihāra*. For this study, the photos of remaining terracotta plaques from the *Mahāvihāra* were taken, and then pictures of every different plaques were cropped. Then images of total 1370 terracotta plaques were retrieved. Then they were analyzed with the artworks of different cultures, and then the connections mentioned above were found.

Somapura Mahāvihāra is an 8th-century Buddhist monastery in the village of Paharpur, near Rajshahi, northwestern Bangladesh. It was one of the five great *Mahāvihāras* of *Mahāyāna* & *Vajrayāna* Buddhism. It covers almost 27 acres (11 hectares) of land. The monastery is thought to have been built by Emperor *Dharmapāla* (770-810 AD) of the Pala Dynasty. Seals bearing the inscription "*Shri-Somapure-Shri- Dharmapāladeva-Mahavihariyarya-bhiksu-sangghasya*" were discovered from the archeological site which implies that it was indeed built by *Dharmapāla*.¹ According to Tibetan sources, including Tibetan translations of *Dharmakayavidhi* and *Madhyamaka Ratnapradīpa*, Taranatha's history, and *Pag-Sam-Jon-Zang*, it was *Dharmapāla*'s successor Devapala (810–850 AD) who built it after his conquest of Varendra. The foundation of *Pāla* Empire about the middle of the 8th century A.D. marks a new epoch in the history of Bengal. It was founded by astute and just ruler Emperor Gopala.² He was democratically elected after a century-long period of anarchy, which was termed as *Mātsyanyāyam* in the Khalimpur copper plate inscription of *Dharmapāla* and also by 12th-century court poet of *Ramapāla*, Sandhyakar Nandi in his magnum opus *Rāmacharitam*. *Pālas* were patronizers of *Mahāyāna* school of Buddhism, and they are credited with developing *Vajrayāna*, i.e. the Tantric school of Buddhism.³ Prototypes of Eastern Indo-Aryan languages started to develop during the

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Pāla rule, and the dynasty laid the foundation of modern Bengali language. The Tantric Buddhist text *Charyāpada* was written in Proto-Bengali language and is considered to be the earliest literary work on the Bengali language.

Buddhism was nearly a trans-Asian religion, and the *Pāla* Empire was one of the flourishing empires during the time of building the *Somapura Mahāvihāra*. That made the connection with different cultures to be possible.

Makara

Five terracotta plaques depicting *Makara* have been found in *Somapura Mahāvihāra*. *Makara* is a mythical creature found in Indian scriptures. It is generally depicted as half terrestrial animal in the frontal part (stag, deer, or elephant) and half aquatic animal in the hindmost part (usually a fish or seal tail, snake tail though sometimes a peacock or even a floral tail is depicted). Though *Makara* may take many different forms throughout Hindu culture, in the modern world, its form is always related to the marsh crocodile or water monitor. But *Makara* in Sinhalese culture has some unique features. In ancient Sinhalese artwork *Makara* has been an invented creature; it is made up of body parts of six or seven animals such as the trunk of the elephant, jaws of the crocodile, ears of the mouse or ape, extruding teeth of wild swine, the tail plume of the peacock and feet of the lion.⁴ The *Makara* is widely used in Sri Lankan Buddhist architecture, often depicted on toranas.⁵ It is also found in *Karava* heraldry,⁶ where *Karava* is a Sinhalese Community in Sri Lanka. Fig. 1 shows *Makara* in *Karava* heraldry.

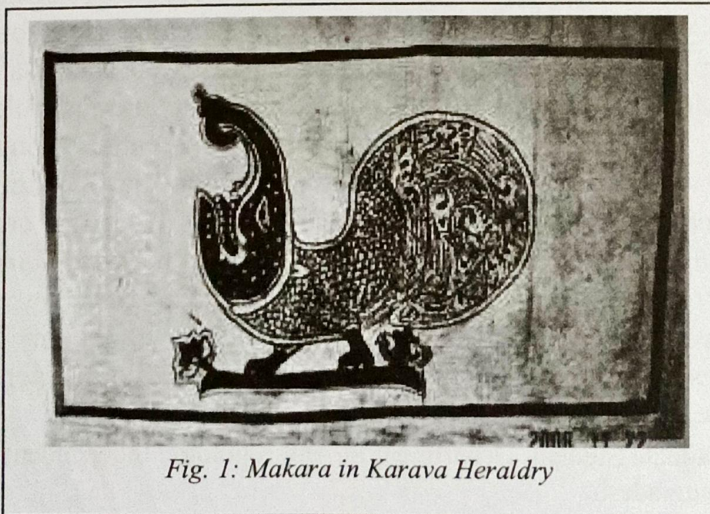


Fig. 1: *Makara* in *Karava* Heraldry

In case of the *Somapura Mahāvihāra Makaras*, precisely these features are found. Two samples of terracotta plaques with *Makaras* are shown in



Fig. 3: Makara (1) from Somapura Mahāvihāra



Fig. 2: Makara (2) from Somapura Mahāvihāra

Fig. 2 and Fig. 3. They have all the same characteristics *i.e.* the trunk of the elephant, jaws of the crocodile, ears of the mouse or ape, extruding teeth of wild swine, the tail plume of the peacock and feet of the lion. These similarities show a firm relation of Sinhalese art with *Sompura Mahāvihāra*.

Probable Explanation of the Sinhalese Connection

The *Makara* with these unique features is found in *Karava* heraldry. The *Karava* community in Sri Lanka claims that they have been migrated to Sri Lanka from North India in some ancient time. They mostly have been converted to Buddhism and became Sinhalised. The image of the mythical creature *Makara* is extensively used in ancient Sri Lankan royal architecture. This flag is one of the main flags still used by the *Karavas* at their ceremonies. The *Makara*, being an emblem of their clan, is related to their clan deity, the sea god *Varuṇa*.⁷

Only *Varuṇa*, the spiritual ruler of the world has power over the *Makara*. The *Varuṇakulasūriya* clan is the largest of the *Karava* clans in southern Sri Lanka. In Vedic mythology *Varuṇa* is the chief of the *Ādithyas*. Remnants of the name *Ādithya* from the medieval period can still be found in *Karava* family names. *Ādithya* is a synonym for *Sūriya* (*i.e.* the Sun). The *Karava* clan *Varuṇakulasūriya*, too, signifies *Varuṇa-Ādithya*. *Varuṇa* is a Vedic deity who had no major role in *Purāṇas*. So bearing the legacy of *Varuṇa* even in the early medieval period by *Karava*

community may indicate how ancient they are and their migration in present-day Sri Lanka in some very ancient times, which also may indicate the antiquity of *Makara*.

Sinhala-Buddhist artists considered *Makara* as the symbol of prosperity and self-sufficiency so they were not hesitant in portraying the sign of *Makara* in the entrance arch gateway to the religious places, such as temple, *stupa* or *bodi*-like Temple of the Tooth and *Lankatilaka* Temple in Kandy.⁸ Examples for the arched gateway with *Makara* over the image of Lord Buddha can be seen in *Ridiiharaya* and *Dambulla* cave temple.⁹ So it can be said that no matter how much ancient the concept of *Makara* is in Sinhalese culture. They were widely accepted by the Sinhalese Buddhists in various religious places, and they become parts of Sinhalese Buddhist artwork.

Before the 12th century three subdivisions of *Theravāda* existed in Sri Lanka, consisting of the monks of the three *Mahāvihāras*: Anuradhapura *Mahāvihāraya*, *Abhayagirivihāra*, and *Jetavanaramaya*.¹⁰ The Anuradhapura *Mahāvihāraya* was the first tradition to be established while *Abhayagirivihara* and *Jetavanaramaya* were established by monks who had broken away from the *Mahāvihāraya* tradition.¹⁰ *Abhayagiri* appears to have been a center for *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* teachings;¹¹ In the 7th century Xuanzang writes, "The *Mahāvihāravāsins* reject the *Mahāyāna* and practice the *Hīnayāna*, while the *Abhayagirivihāravāsins* study both *Hīnayāna* and *Mahāyāna* teachings and propagate the *Tripiṭaka*."¹² In the 12th century, the *Mahāvihāraya* gained the political support of *Parakramabahu I* (1153–1186), and he completely abolished the *Abhayagiri* and *Jetavanaya* traditions.^{13,14} So it is expected that before 12th century there was a connection between *Sompura Vihāra* and Sri Lankan Buddhist *vihāras* as both taught *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* traditions. And that can be the explanation of depiction of Sinhalese *Makara* at *Somapura Mahāvihāra*.

Simhamukha

A total of four terracotta plaques has been found where the depicted figure resembles *Simhamukha* or *Senge Dongma*, which means lion-faced *dākinī* in English, where *dākinī* is a type of sacred female spirit in *Vajrayāna* Buddhism. Currently it is an essential part of Tibetan Buddhism. *Simhamukha* is iconographically represented as a wrathful deity who is usually depicted as a dark blue or maroon, colored lion-faced female, and is associated with the direction East. In these terracotta plaques the lion-faced nude female figures are seen. (Fig. 4, Fig. 5).

Another essential feature of the iconography of a *dākinī* is observed. In many cases they are seen to have a posture where their vagina is easily exposed. In the terracotta plaques of *Somapura Vihāra*, these feature is also observed, wherein one case it was sitting in a way where her vagina was easily seen from the front (Fig. 4), and in another case, it was being tried to be exposed by her hands (Fig. 5). The photos of thangkas with iconography of a *dakini*, and the *Simhamukha* has been shown in Fig. 6 and Fig. 7 respectively, where thangkas are Tibetan Buddhist paintings.

Currently *Simhamukha* is only found in Tibetan Buddhist practices. According to the Indian traditions followed by the Sarma schools, the *dākinī Simhamukha* is a tutelary deity arising out of the *Chakrasamvara* cycle of Tantras and belongs to the *Anuttarayoga* 'wisdom' classification.¹⁵ The Sarma schools' *Simhamukha* is unrelated to the deity of the same name and appearance, which arose in the later indigenous Tibetan Nyingma 'terma' (treasure) traditions, where she is regarded as the secret form of Guru Rinpoche (*Padmasambhava*). According to the Nyingma school, this *dākinī* and female tantric Buddha is the principal *dākinī* teacher and one of the primary fierce manifestations of



Fig. 4: *Simhamukha* (1) from *Somapura Mahāvihāra*



Fig. 5: *Simhamukha* (2) from *Somapura Mahāvihāra*

Padmasambhava, the 8th Century mahasiddha, claimed to be the founder of the same school. As such, she is connected with many ceremonies of the *Dzogchen* tradition. A fierce *dākinī*, she is also one of the *Phramenma*, a group of female deities from the *BardoThödol*, or 'Tibetan Book of the Dead'. The female lama Jetsun Lochen (1865- 1951) founded a *Simhamukha* practice lineage.¹⁵ Sometimes *Simhamukha* is also seen as a retinue of Palden Lhamo, a female deity of *Vajrayāna* Buddhism. The

appearance of *Simhamukha* shows a connection between *Somapura Mahāvihāra* and Tibetan culture.



Fig. 6: A Thangka Depicting a *Dākinī*



Fig. 7: A Thangka Depicting *Simhamukha*

Probable Explanation of the Tibetan Connection

According to the Indian traditions followed by the Sarma schools, the *Dākinī Simhamukha* is a tutelary deity arising out of the *Chakrasamvara* cycle of Tantras and belongs to the *Anuttarayoga* 'wisdom' classification.¹⁵ Besides, the term "*Dākinī*" maybe a Tibetan term, which means "sky goer", and if it is then it may have originated in the Sanskrit *khecara*, a term from the *Cakrasamvara* Tantra.¹⁶ *Cakrasamvara* Tantra is considered a prominent variety of *Anuttarayoga* Tantra, which was written in 8th century in *Pāla* empire.¹⁷ The *Pāla* emperors promoted *Vajrayāna* Buddhism, so it is natural for the *Simhamukha* to appear in *Somapura Mahāvihāra*.

Buddhism was formally introduced to Tibet during the Tibetan Empire (7th-9th century CE). Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures from India were first translated into Tibetan under the reign of the Tibetan king Songtsan Gampo (618-649 CE).¹⁸ This period also saw the development of the Tibetan writing system and classical Tibetan. In the 8th century King Trisong Detsen (755-797 CE) established it as the official religion of the state.¹⁹ Trisong Detsen invited Indian Buddhist scholars to his court, including Padmasambhava (8th century CE) and Santaraksita (725-788), which are considered the founders of Nyingma (The Ancient Ones), the oldest tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.²⁰

At this time, Tibetan Buddhism started influencing the scholars of *Pāla* empire. Those scholars already created a blend of *Mahayāna* and *Vajrayāna* traditions. And later this blend characterized all forms of Tibetan Buddhism. These scholars' teachings were centered on the main concepts of Tibetan Buddhism, i.e. those of *Padmasambhava*, *Santarakṣita*, and *Kamalaśīlā*.²¹ Thus Tibetan Buddhism got influenced by the culture of Bengal, and hence the connection between Tibetan Buddhism and *Somapura Mahāvihāra* was established.

Camel

Four terracotta plaques are found in *Somapura Mahāvihāra* depicting camels, where one of them had a prominent hump of its back (Fig. 8). Until early middle age, the depiction of camels in India was mainly found in Indo-Scythian coinage, as it can be seen in Fig. 9. Indo-Scythian coins essentially continue the Indo-Greek tradition, by using the Greek language on the obverse and the *Kharoṣṭhī* language on the reverse. The portrait of the king is never shown however, and is replaced by depictions of the king on horse (and sometimes on camel), or sometimes sitting cross-legged on a cushion. The reverse of their coins typically show Greek divinities. In case of Fig. 9, in the left side of the figure, the king is being seen to be mounted on a very well rendered camel.²²

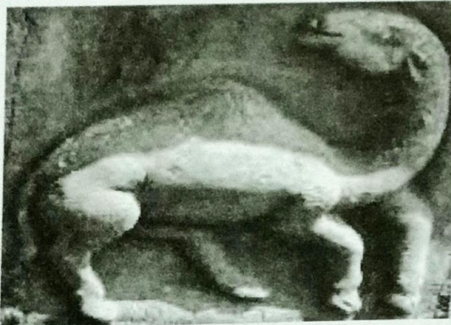


Fig. 8: Depiction of Camel Found in *Somapura Mahāvihāra*



Fig. 9: Depiction of Camel in an Indo-Scythian Coin

Probable Explanation of the Indo-Scythian Connection

Camels are found only in the north western region in India. Historically this region was ruled by Indo-Scythians from 2nd century BC to 4th century AD.²³ After that that region held the legacy of Indo-Scythian culture. Indo-Scythians appear to have prospered through both legitimate trade and the acquisition of booty during conflict. Transported by camel caravan in a journey that took many months from China to the Mediterranean, portable wealth in the form of jewelry, artworks, silks and other precious things were warehoused at key trading posts located

at Bactra, Shibargan, Begram (the *Kuṣhān*'s summer capital), Samarkand and the desert oasis city at Merv. Indo-Scythians slowly became Indo-Aryanised, converted to Hinduism and created different clans like Rajputs in India.

After *Dharmapāla* made Kannauj a vassal state of *Pāla* empire, he arranged an enthronement ceremony of new vassal Chakrayudh was being coronated. In that ceremony, kings of Bhoja, Matsya, Madra, Kuru, Yadu, Yavana, Avanti, Gandhara, and Kir kingdoms were present and became his ally. They acknowledged *Dharmapāla* as *Maharajadhiraja*.²⁴ That time the kingdom of Yavana and Gandhara were influenced by Indo-Scythian culture. *Dharmapāla*'s son Devapala made an expedition to Kamboja. That kingdom was another place where the Indo-Scythian cultural legacy was maintained, and the kingdom was formerly ruled by Indo-Scythians. In the reign of Devapala, Kamboja and Huna kingdoms were situated at the border of the Pala empire. And so for ensuring security, he conquered both of the territories.²⁴ These are two possible ways where Indo-Scythian cultural elements got connected with *Pāla* empire and *Somapura Mahāvihāra*.

Atlas

In Greek mythology, Atlas was condemned to hold up the celestial heavens for eternity after the Titanomachy.²⁵ In *Somapura Mahāvihāra* we see multiple terracottas depicting the Greek titan Atlas. Although unlike in Greco-Buddhist art, these Atlas figures lack muscular bodies (Fig. 10, Fig. 11). They look more Eastern Indian than Greek. However like the traditional Atlas found in Hadda, Afghanistan, they are depicted as supporting the monument with their two hands (Fig. 12)²⁶.

Interestingly, we also see some Atlas in reverse position, unlike the traditional style. In Greco-Buddhist art, we also see winged Atlas and Griffin. *Garuḍa* is the Indian mythological equivalent of Griffin, and there are a lot of *Garuḍa* terracottas.



Fig. 10: Depiction of Atlas (1) at Somapura Mahāvihāra



Fig. 11: Depiction of Atlas (2) at Somapura Mahāvihāra



Fig. 12: Atlas at Hadda, Afghanistan

Acanthus

In Greek architecture and decorative arts, *acanthus* is a stylized ornamental motif based on a native Mediterranean plant with jagged leaves, *Acanthus spinosus*. It was first used by the Greeks in the 5th century BC on temple roof ornaments, on wall friezes, and the capital of the Corinthian column. In Greco-Buddhist art we see extensive use of *acanthus*. Fig. 13 shows Buddha on capitol within *acanthus* leaves. It is an artwork of Hellenistic *Gāndhāra* in the 3rd or 4th century.²⁷ In *Somapura Mahāvihāra* six terracotta plaques have been found with the depiction of *acanthus*. Two of them are shown here (Fig. 14, Fig. 15)

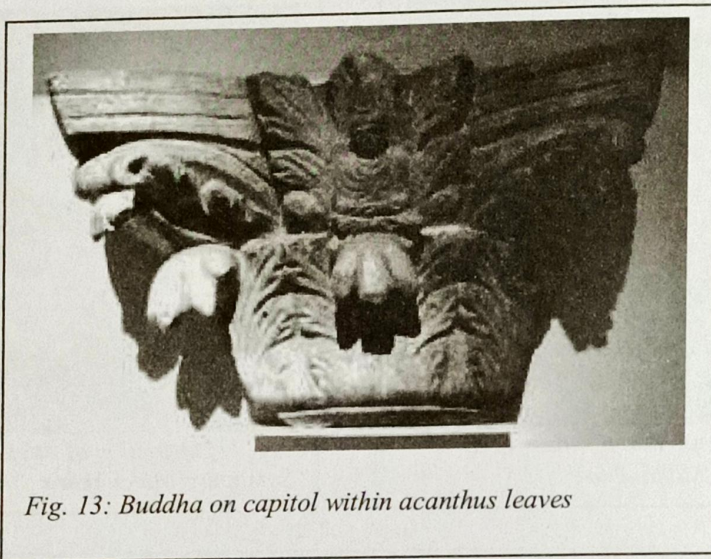


Fig. 13: Buddha on capitol within acanthus leaves

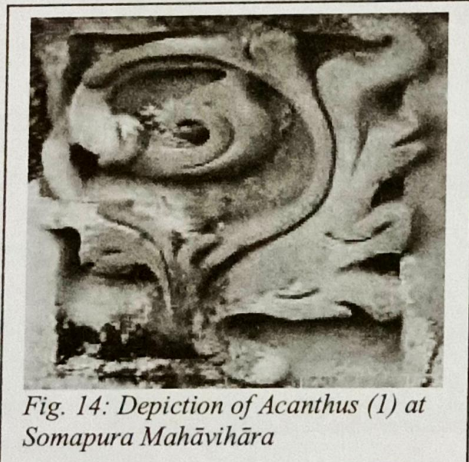


Fig. 14: Depiction of Acanthus (1) at Somapura Mahāvihāra



Fig. 15 - Depiction of Acanthus (2) at Somapura Mahāvihāra

Probable Explanation of the Indo-Greek Connection

The Indo-Greeks & Greco-Buddhism

After the death of Alexander the Great the vast Macedonian Empire of the Greeks fragmented into three kingdoms - The Attalid Empire based in Greece and Anatolia, The Ptolemaic Empire based in Egypt and the Seleucid Empire based in Greater Iran and Western India. Later Greco-Bactrian kingdom seceded from the Seleucid Empire around 250 BC. It was one of the richest and most potent Hellenistic states, if only for a brief 131 years (256 BC - 125 BC). Later they also had a successor, the Indo Greek Kingdom (180 BC - 10 AD). They're quite interesting, representing the most Eastern extent of Greek rule after Alexander's

conquest. It was a vast kingdom encompassing Bactria, Sogdiana, and Ferghana, as well as parts of Persia and Punjab.²⁸

This Hellenistic period syncretized Greek religion, culture, and architecture with Iranian and Indian influences, and heavily influenced the development of modern Buddhism. The empire was multi-ethnic and multi-cultural, with Greek kings ruling alongside local kings. They fought a major war with the Seleucids. They bordered and had generally good relations with the *Mauryān* Dynasty. They are mentioned in multiple Indian texts including the *Mahābhārata* as *Yavanas* or *Yonas*. They also bound the Han Chinese. The Chinese referred to the Greeks as *Dayuan* (Great Ionians). Greco-Buddhist art is the artistic manifestation of Greco-Buddhism, a cultural syncretism between the Classical Greek culture and Buddhism, which developed over close to 1000 years in Central Asia, between the conquests of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BC, and the Islamic conquests of the 7th century AD.²⁹ Greco-Buddhist art is characterized by the intense idealistic realism of Hellenistic art and the first representations of the Buddha in human form, which have helped define the artistic (and particularly, sculptural) canon for Buddhist art throughout the Asian continent up to the present. It is also a unique example of cultural syncretism between eastern and western traditions, which has been achieved by no other art to such a degree. The origins of Greco-Buddhist art are to be found in the Hellenistic Greco-Bactrian kingdom (250 BC- 130 BC), located in today's Afghanistan, from which Hellenistic culture radiated into the Indian sub-continent with the establishment of the Indo-Greek kingdom (180 BC-10 BC). Under the Indo-Greeks and then the *Kushāns*, the interaction of Greek and Buddhist culture flourished in the area of *Gāndhāra*, in today's northern Pakistan, before spreading further into India, influencing the art of *Mathurā*, and then the Buddhist art of the *Gupta* empire, which was to extend to the rest of South-East Asia. The influence of Greco-Buddhist art also spread northward towards Central Asia, strongly affecting the art of the Tarim Basin at the door of China, and ultimately the arts of China, Korea, and Japan. Greco-Buddhist art depicts the life of the Buddha visually, probably by incorporating the real-life models and concepts which were available to the artists of the period. The Bodhisattvas are depicted as bare-chested and jeweled Indian princes and the Buddhas as Greek kings wearing the light toga-like himation. The buildings in which they are depicted incorporate Greek style, with the ubiquitous Indo-Corinthian capitals and Greek decorative scrolls. Surrounding deities form a pantheon of Greek (Atlas, Herakles)

and Indian gods (*Indra*). Sometime between the 2nd century BC and the 1st century AD, the first anthropomorphic representations of the Buddha were developed. These were absent from earlier *strata* of Buddhist art, which preferred to represent the Buddha with symbols such as the *stūpa*, the *Bodhi* tree, the empty seat, the wheel, or the footprints. But the innovative anthropomorphic Buddha image immediately reached a very high level of sculptural sophistication, naturally inspired by the sculptural styles of Hellenistic Greece.³⁰

Many of the stylistic elements in the representations of the Buddha point to Greek influence: the Greek himation (a light toga-like wavy robe covering both shoulders: Buddhist characters are always represented with a *dhoti* loincloth before this innovation), the contrapposto stance of the upright figures (1st–2nd century *Gāndhāra* standing Buddhas), the stylized Mediterranean curly hair and top-knot apparently derived from the style of the *Belvedere Apollo* (330 BC), and the measured quality of the faces, all rendered with intense artistic realism. Some of the standing Buddhas were sculpted using the specific Greek technique of making the hands and sometimes the feet in marble to increase the realistic effect, and the rest of the body in another material. The figure of the Buddha was incorporated within architectural designs, such as Corinthian pillars and friezes. Scenes of the life of the Buddha are typically depicted in a Greek architectural environment, with protagonist wearing Greek clothes. The greatest of the Indo-Greek king, Menander I had a dialogue with *Kāśmirī* monk *Nāgasena* which is recorded in the non-canonical *Pāli* text "*Milinda Panha*." The concept of *Bodhisattvas* developed in Buddhism due to this Hellenization. Deities from the Greek mythological pantheon also tend to be incorporated in Buddhist representations, displaying a strong syncretism. In particular, Herakles has been used abundantly as the representation of *Vajrapāṇi*, the protector of the Buddha. Other Greek deities generously used in Greco-Buddhist art are representation of Atlas and the Greek wind god. Atlas, in particular, tends to be involved as a sustaining element in Buddhist architectural elements. The Greek wind god Boreas became the Japanese wind god Fujin through the Greco-Buddhist Wardo.³¹ The mother deity *Hārītī* was inspired by Tyche. Winged cupids are another popular motif in Greco-Buddhist art. They usually fly in pairs, holding a wreath, the Greek symbol of victory and kingship, over the Buddha. These figures, also known as *apsarases* were extensively adopted in Buddhist art, especially throughout Eastern Asia, in forms derivative to the Greco-Buddhist representation. Scenes of cupids holding lavish garlands, sometimes

adorned with fruits, is another prevalent *Gāndhāran* motif, directly inspired by Greek art. It is sometimes argued that the only concession to Indian art appears in the anklets worn by the cupids. *Kāmadevas* are the Indian mythological equivalent of cupids.

Kuṣhāṇs and Mahāyāna Buddhism

The dynasty which replaced the Indo-Greeks were the *Kuṣhāṇs*. The ruling elite of the *Kuṣhāṇs* was one of five branches of the *Yuezhi* (Tocharians) confederation, an Indo-European nomadic people. The *Yuezhi* lived in the grasslands of eastern Central Asia's Tarim Basin, in modern-day Xinjiang, China, until they were driven west by the Xiongnu (Huns) in 176-160 BCE. Later they assimilated into other fellow Indo-European people living in the area, the Iranian nomades (Indo-Scythians/Sakas) and Greeks. The *Yuezhi* reached the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom, located in northern Afghanistan and Uzbekistan, around 135 BCE, and displaced the Greek dynasties that resettled to the southeast in areas of the *Hindu Kuśh* and the Indus basin, in present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan.³² The *Kuṣhāṇs* spread out from Bactria to defeat other Central Asian tribes. The *Kuṣhāṇs* were the patronizers of *Mahāyāna* school of Buddhism. The *Kuṣhāṇs* became the inheritors of Indo-Greek culture, customs, and language.³³ So the further development of Greco-Buddhism resulted in the development of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism under their rule.³⁴ The greatest of the *Kuṣhāṇs* kings, Kanishka's reputation in Buddhist tradition regarded with utmost importance as he not only believed in Buddhism but also encouraged its teachings as well. As a proof of it, he administered the 4th Buddhist Council in Kashmir (74 AD) as the head of the council. It is said that for the Fourth Council of Kashmir, Kanishka gathered 500 monks headed by *Vasumitra*, partly, it seems, to compile extensive commentaries on the *Sarvastivadin Abhidharma*, although it is possible that some editorial work was carried out upon the existing canon itself. The primary fruit of this Council was the vast commentary known as the *Mahāvibhāṣā* ("Great Exegesis"), an extensive compendium and reference work on a portion of the *Sarvastivadin Abhidharma*.³⁵ The *Mahāyāna* tradition based some of its scriptures on (refutations of) the *Sarvastivadin Abhidharma* texts. It was during the rule of *Kuṣhāṇs* the *Mahāyāna* Buddhism was transmitted to West and East through Silk Road, making it the dominant sect of Buddhism.

Development of Vajrayāna from Mahāyāna

Vajrayāna or Tantric Buddhism developed in Bengal. Buddhism had already flourished in Bengal during the time of Ashoka. With the advent of the *Mahāyāna* School, a great Buddhist educational center had been

established at Nalanda. Nagarjuna also spent many years of his life there. During the Gupta period (863-1010 AD) it grew both in size and importance until it became the great University of Nalanda where 3 to 10 thousand monks at a time lived, teaching and studying and where various subjects were taught such as Buddhism, Logic, Philosophy, Law, Medicine, Grammar, *Yoga*, Alchemy and Astrology. Nalanda was supported by kings of several dynasties and served as the great international center of learning until it was destroyed by the Turks in about 1750 B.E. (1200 A.D.).³⁶ The flourishing state of Buddhism in Bangladesh at the beginning of the *Gupta* period presupposes that Buddhism had been prospering in different parts of Bangladesh during the early centuries of the Christian era. Now it has been clear that Buddhism in that time followed the *Mahāyāna* principles. Fa-hein mentioned in his itinerary (399 - 414 A.D.) about the Kingdom of Champa on the Southern bank of the Ganges when he came across much evidence of living Buddhism, which was mostly *Mahāyāna*. In the 7th century, Hiuen-Tsang, the famous Chinese pilgrim in India, recorded various accounts of the persecution of Buddhism by Sasanka, the king of *Gouḍa* (North-Western part of Bengal). He recorded *Mahāyāna* Buddhism in various parts of Bangladesh with some Sthavir schools. For both Buddhism and Bengal the golden age came after the rise of the native *Pāla* dynasty.³⁷ The *Pālas* had built institutions like *Somapura*, *Vikramshila*, *Odantapuri*, and *Jagaddala*, which along with Nalanda, served as both *Mahāvihāras* and universities. A large number of texts that would later appear in the *Kangyur & Tengyur* (the main cannon of Tibetan Buddhism) were known to have been composed or copied at *Jagadala*.³⁸ It is likely that the earliest dated anthology of Sanskrit verse, the *Subhasitaratnakosa*, was compiled by Vidyakara at *Jagadala* toward the end of the 11th century or the beginning of the 12th.^{39,40} According to some scholars, most chanted sutra in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, the Heart *Sutra*, or *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya* was also composed in Bengal during this time.⁴¹ Although the first tantric Buddhist texts appeared in India in the 3rd century and continued to appear until the 12th century, it was during the time of *Pālas* that the Mahāsiddhas started to use tantric techniques to achieve enlightenment in a faster way. This resulted in the development of *Vajrayāna* Buddhism. The development of *Vajrayāna* helped to spread Buddhism among the Shamanistic Tibeto-Burman people.

Concluding Remarks

The study has been done with the analysis of 1370 terracotta plaques at *Somapura Mahāvihāra*. But many of them were obscure or broken for

the lack of maintenance. Further study is necessary with the terracotta plaques of other *Mahāvihāra* built in the *Pāla* empire to reveal more connection.

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